European journal of American studies

13-2 | 2018
Summer 2018

The Eternal Night of Consumer Consciousness: The Metaphorical Embodiment of Darkness in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Inbar Kaminsky

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13010
DOI: 10.4000/ejas.13010
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference
Inbar Kaminsky, « The Eternal Night of Consumer Consciousness: The Metaphorical Embodiment of Darkness in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], 13-2 | 2018, Online since 15 August 2018, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13010 ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.13010

The Eternal Night of Consumer Consciousness: The Metaphorical Embodiment of Darkness in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Inbar Kaminsky

1 When both a visible and metaphorical darkness is cast upon the wasteland of post-apocalyptic America, it is the stoic wordlessness that brings about the sparse attributes of the void: "Barren, silent, godless" (McCarthy 2). It seems that the simplicity of the roads as contours of movement allows the two unnamed protagonists of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* to regain some form of sanity in a world that has gone mad.

2 Helpless in the face of the engulfing darkness, the father and the son also represent post-consumer culture; the father is essentially the former consumer who first acknowledges both the tyranny of the darkness and the spread of wastelands in cultural and economic terms as the demise of consumer culture and possibly the demise of western civilization. While the father soon abandons his consumer consciousness, his son is a unique "product" of post-apocalyptic America. The boy is not only innocent due to his tender age; as an individual who has apparently not been exposed to the thriving American consumer culture that existed prior to the apocalypse, the boy represents a new socio-economic model—the non-consumer.

3 In addition, two seemingly mutually exclusive forces emerge throughout the novel; the first process is the re-signification of the road, culminating in the pastiche of the road narrative formula. The second is a layered mechanism that produces the process of personification of the darkness versus the disembodiment of the living. The latter process culminates in the metaphorical body of the darkness, which eventually serves as an alternative to the protagonists' corporeality.

4 In fact, the pastiche of the road narrative formula facilitates the formation of the metaphorical body of the darkness. While the road is gradually depleted of its symbolic role of guidance by the pastiche, the symbolic role of the darkness as an omniscient entity

increases. In other words, when the road itself is lost and is no longer in-synced with any map, actual or cultural, then both characters, but most notably the father, find themselves engulfed in the emotional and physical need to surrender to something greater than they are. In the custody of the darkness, the protagonists are both frail children who attempt to forsake their sense of body by employing as fewer activities as possible while exerting minimal effort—setting up camp for the night, starting a fire to fight off the cold, sleeping and waking up from nightmarish visions.

5 The process of personification begins with attributing god-like qualities to the darkness, aggrandizing it while portraying the helplessness of the father and the son as they face this colossal force. This progression of personification then evolves into the darkness's metaphorical body as a living entity; its dominance over the protagonists' corporeality become tangible and eventually results in the symbolic abandonment of the protagonists' bodies and their identification with the metaphorical body of the darkness as a substitute for their corporeality.

6 In the case of the father, this process also leads to a physical separation from his body, followed by his death, as well as the boy's separation from his father due to the father's demise. Finally, the dominance of the darkness exceeds its thematic importance within the plot and infiltrates the narratological level of the novel by casting its blinding pall over it; the narratological agents are unnamed, their quotations are not formally divided by quotation marks and there are no chapter breaks.

1. Breadcrumbs in the Dark

7 *The Road* does not specify what type of apocalypse demolished America and presumably the rest of the world. The novel only acknowledges the violent imagery of a ravaged country and occasionally personifies the road and its surroundings: "Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind" (6). However, the road frequently marks the location of countless relics of abandoned and demolished cities: "the shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste" (7). At times, the road itself becomes a relic of pre-apocalyptic America: "But the roads are still there" (44).

8 It becomes increasingly evident throughout the novel that the map the father holds and the road the father and the son travel through are incompatible on several levels. First, the gap between the map and the road is manifested by the deterioration of the map as a referent, since the "gradual disintegration of the map is a reflection of its decreasing ability to serve as a means of understanding and negotiating space" (Warde 2). Second, the gap presents itself on the linguistic level, as the novel does not include names of locations, forcing the reader to imagine a new world (Kunsa 62).

9 Third, on the level of meaning, the road becomes a form of blank slate, "a sort of tabula rasa—a landscape erased of many of its previously defining features" (Edwards 57). This is the ground zero of signification, into which the novel pours its thematic landslide; the old road has been stripped of its titles and the new road is amassed with new meaning by both the protagonists and the reader: "The characters of *The Road* are facing a landscape so vague it almost is not there, yet consequently also a landscape that comes to mean everything" (Graulund 60). Fourth, the map is also deteriorating on the material level, an

assortment of shreds that need to be reassembled every time the protagonists wish to use it: “The tattered oilcompany roadmap had once been taped together but now it was just sorted into leaves” (McCarthy 43).

10 However, while some have recognized this process as the simulacra of the road (Warde 5), it is more precise to examine this process of stripping the road from its connotations and references in relation to the symbolic accumulation of two polar opposites: “no meaning” and “every meaning.” These mutually exclusive signifiers essentially cancel each other out, leaving the reader with the disenfranchised contours of what was once a road but now only serves to point out the ironic gap between pre-apocalyptic traveling and post-apocalyptic wandering—a pastiche. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* , Jameson defines pastiche as a non-satiric parody, devoid of any sense of humor (17), which is the precise sentiment that the road evokes throughout the novel—an empty shell that was once an inseparable part of trade, leisure and life.

11 The issue of geography is pertinent to the analysis of this novel; it is not only that the father’s “place-memories” work “like those faint lines of text in a palimpsest that show through beneath the newer inscriptions” (Godfrey 164), but rather that these memories are part and parcel of the process that both the protagonists and the reader aimlessly roam through—the pastiche of the road narrative formula. Throughout this process, the father’s geographical memories are essentially sublimated, distilled into the pure form of echoes that haunt the father precisely because they no longer function as memories or as recollections of an Eden-like America (Edwards 57). Instead, these reverberations of the past are both rootless and even absurd in the face of the vacant territory.

12 The novel is also a clear subversion of Bakhtin’s chronotope of the road, in which events are mostly “govern by chance” (17), and the protagonists travel through “familiar territory” (18). The events in the novel are almost always emblematic of the moral, economic and physical ruin that has befallen America and possibly the world. In fact, most of the major events that take place throughout the plot emphasize this subversion, since they indicate an emplotment that strives towards redemption in an alien world, precisely the opposite of the chronotope that characterizes road narratives. Notable examples include the father’s dreams of his pre-apocalyptic existence, his encounters with drifters and relics of cannibalism, as well as the father’s death and his son’s informal adoption by a traveler.

2. Pitch Black Body

13 The personification process of the darkness is complex, shifting back and forth between indirect and direct personification. The indirect personification consists of attributions of blame and culpability to the darkness in relation to the post-apocalyptic state. Forms of direct personification consist of characterization of the darkness, as well as the attribution of God-like powers to the darkness.

14 Throughout McCarthy’s *The Road*, the darkness is often endowed with ominous powers: “watching the nameless dark come to enshroud them. The gray shape of the city vanished in the night's onset like an apparition” (8). The darkness is portrayed as a living entity that engulfs the post-apocalyptic world, “autistic” (14) and “bitter” (55). The amassment of violent imagery in relation to the darkness corresponds with the sense of loss, death and grief that have become tangible for the father: “The nights dead still and deader

black. So cold" (292), and the scarce source of light is the bereaving force, lamenting the post-apocalyptic state of the world: "By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp" (32).

15 However, the correlation between the darkness and the violent imagery seems to imply, in a roundabout way of personification, that the darkness it to blame for the apocalypse: "The nights were blinding cold and casket black and the long reach of the morning had a terrible silence to it. Like a dawn before battle" (137). The darkness is presented as both the sin and its purgatory: "the noon sky black as the cellars of hell" (188). Moreover, the night and its engulfing darkness clearly act in the service of death: "And the dreams so rich in color. How else would death call you? Waking in the cold dawn it all turned to ash instantly. Like certain ancient frescoes entombed for centuries suddenly exposed to the day" (20).

16 The father often finds himself helpless in the face of the almighty darkness: "At night when he woke coughing he'd sit up with his hand pushed over his head against the blackness. Like a man waking in a grave" (228). Blindness is evoked in order to portray human powerlessness in the face of both the physical and metaphorical darkness: "They went on in the perfect blackness, sightless as the blind" (250). The darkness is blinding since it demolishes both the natural and technological forces that can provide light, but it is also blinding because it demolishes any real sense of hope.

17 The personification of the darkness evolves to the extent that it is considered omnipotent from the father's point of view, as the single dominating force of the post-apocalyptic world – "he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the interstate earth. Darkness implacable... The crushing black vacuum of the universe" (138). Darkness consumes all and thus ultimately conquers all the natural elements: "The snow whispered down in the stillness and the sparks rose and dimmed and died in the eternal blackness" (101). It also controls the father and the son since the darkness is often described through verbs related to battle and the two protagonists always succumb to it: "Night overtook them on a muddy road" (92).

18 When the father turns ill, the darkness becomes a metaphor for the post-apocalyptic world as he promises his son that he "will not send you into the darkness alone" (265). In the end, the dead father becomes emblematic of the darkness, cold and frightening: "he knelt beside his father and held his cold hand and said his name over and over again" (301). While the father's absolute separation from his body takes place during his death, he lacks any 'real' sense of corporeality throughout the novel.

19 In the beginning of *The Road*, the father is awakened from a dream in which he and the boy are "Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast" (1). This form of disembodiment, in the sense of losing control over one's corporeality while surrendering to a greater force, is characteristic of the father, who struggles with his sense of body throughout the novel until his death. Thus, the father's departure can be construed as the ultimate surrender to both the metaphorical and physical darkness.

20 The metaphorical body of the darkness also plays a significant role in the erosion of the father's consumer consciousness; even the few relics of the demolished civilization are hardly visible as they are gradually masked by the darkness on the visual level and eliminated on the imaginary level due to the imminent threats to the survival of the

father and the son. The father cannot even conjure up a consumer consciousness of currency and trade when he struggles to obtain the basic necessities.

21 The daily hardship experienced by the protagonists is amplified by the darkness—hunger is prolonged when the father and the son cannot scavenge for food during the night, the darkness brings with it a devastating cold that can only be tolerated by creating a fire and predators seem to move much more efficiently in the custody of the dark. In addition to these harsh physical conditions, the detachment of the father from his own corporeality and his evolving identification with the metaphorical body of darkness leave no room for consumer consciousness; the consumerism state of mind has to do with the illusion of plenitude and the subsequent need to purchase "it" in the hopes of grasping this obscure affluence. As the sole representative of the demolished American consumer culture, the father crosses over to the dark side in more ways than one, essentially forsaking the possibility of contemplating another world or another alternative for him and his son while he succumbs to the overwhelming darkness that surrounds him.

3. Americ(an)a

22 In his introduction to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Christopher Bigsby remarks: "In an immigrant society, which has, by definition, chosen to reject the past, faith in the future is not a matter of choice. When today fails to offer the justification for hope, tomorrow becomes the only grail worth pursuing" (1). This "American Dream," a term which was originally evoked to portray the collective American coping mechanism in the face of the Great Depression, has transformed since the economic expansion of Post-World War II to portray "aspirations pertaining to economic opportunity, consumer freedom, financial security, happiness, employment satisfaction, homeownership, and wealth" (Cohen 45-46) while retaining the internal tension of the "American Dream" as an "aspirational heuristic and its realization" (Cohen 46).

23 McCarthy's dystopian tale is situated after the collapse of the "American Dream," but it certainly engages its absence, most notably through the distinction between the consumerism of pre-apocalyptic America and the non-consumerism of the wasteland. This gap is portrayed by the inherent difference between the consumer consciousness of the father, who is portrayed at the beginning of the novel as a dreamer and a relic of American consumerism, and the son as a non-consumer, both a "pure" product of the palimpsestic wasteland and a literary allusion to anti-consumerism.

24 The transition from hyper-consumerism, which "rests on cyber-technology, its development originally issuing from US government and corporate investment, the accompanying surge of inventions changing everything everywhere" (de Grazia 81) to what many refer to as anti-consumerism, a socio-political backlash against the "pulverized global financial market at the feet of the feral shopper 'maxed out' on easy credit" (Humphery 3) is symbolically rendered in *The Road* through the use of relics of American consumer culture—the billboards, the shopping cart and the Coca-Cola can. These relics represent the fundamental process of consumerism—advertising, purchase and product—and the novel employs their distinct symbolic meaning for the father, who is also a relic of consumer culture, and his son, who experiences these relics with no sense of personal cultural context.

25 Indeed, the novel's implicit criticism of American consumerism can be viewed as prophetic, considering the fact that the novel preceded the financial crisis in the US, which began with the collapse of subprime mortgages in 2007, a mere year after the novel was published. But criticism of American consumer culture existed prior to the subprime crisis, most notable is Naomi Klein's *No Logo*, which was first published in December 1999 and effectively ushered in the new millennium's awareness of corporate domination. In her analysis of the brand crisis that took place in US during the 1990's, Klein also referred to the endurance of "companies that had always understood that they were selling brands before product" (17), such as Coca Cola, which "weren't fazed by the brand crisis, opting instead to escalate the brand war, especially since they had their eyes firmly fixed on global expansion "(17). The juxtaposition of Coca Cola's status as an American empire seeking global domination in the 1990's and its single relic in the novel elucidates the socioeconomic commentary that *The Road* offers regarding corporate hubris.

26 At the beginning of the novel, it is clear that the father still regains some of his consumer consciousness; this is particularly evident when the protagonists' come across an abandoned gas station. During the initial encounter, the father does not see any potential in the things he finds as he rummages through the gas station. However, shortly after walking away from the gas station, his consumer consciousness enables him to conjure up possible uses for the motor oil that relate to a form of enjoyment rather than a survival instinct:

> A quarter mile down the road he stopped and looked back. We're not thinking, he said. We have to go back... In the service bay he dragged out the steel trashdrum and tipped it over and pawed out all the quart plastic oilbottles... Oil for their little slutlamp to light the long gray dusks, the long gray dawns. You can read me a story, the boy said. Cant you, Papa? Yes he said. I can. (5-6)

27 There is also a symbolic meaning to the father's actions that stem from a rare moment of consumer consciousness—he is literally fighting off the darkness, which he will later succumb to after his consumer consciousness will dissolve and his identification with the darkness will commence.

28 As the plot unfolds, the fragmented symbols of the American consumer culture mirror the demise of the father's consumer consciousness. While the starving protagonists roam through deserted towns in desperate search for food, their lack of alternatives is reflected in the billboards, which were once a prominent instrument in the service of capitalism and are now used as a primitive tool of survival in post-apocalyptic America: "They passed through towns that warned people away with messages scrawled on the billboards. The billboards had been whited out with thin coats of paint in order to write on them and through the paint could be seen a pale palimpsest of advertisements for goods with no longer existed" (135).

29 In addition, two main representations of American consumer culture survive the apocalypse and in turn come to symbolize the demise of this very culture—the shopping cart, in which the father and the son carry their few earthly possessions as they travel through the wasteland, and the Coca-Cola can that the father introduces to his son, who is clearly not a "product" of American consumer culture but of post-apocalyptic America —pale and frail, innocent and ignorant. But more importantly, both the shopping cart and the Coca-Cola can symbolize the demise of consumer consciousness—the absence of choice and the annihilation of abundance.

30 Several scholars have commented on the linguistic apocalypse depicted in this novel, epitomized by such objects as the shopping cart and the map, which have been deprived of their referent (Woodson 89), and "often function as ironic registers," as well as "psychologically embodied" to the extent of inducing "anxiety and something akin to the human sense of loss" (Wilhelm 131-2) in their absence.

31 The epiphanic moment in which the father discovers a "surviving" Coca-Cola, an iconic American symbol that has endured the demise of modern American culture, is a crucial one. Indeed, it can be said that "with the portrayal of what might well be the last Coca-Cola on earth, McCarthy does in fact touch upon a possible end of capitalism in this scene" (Schleusener 6). This discovery represents a coming of age ritual, a rite of passage for the boy who he is promptly asked by his father to transport himself from the consciousness of a choice-deprived survivor into the consciousness of a consumer:

> He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola.
> What is it, Papa?
> It's a treat. For you.
> What is it?
> Here. Sit down.
> He slipped the boy's knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy. Go ahead, he said.
> The boy took the can. It's bubbly, he said.
> Go ahead.
> He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it. It's really good, he said. (22-23)

32 The ritual essentially fails since the boy only consumes the product. In strict adherence to his survivor state of mind, the boy does not ask for more, a typical response among children, but rather acknowledges the experience as unique, a relic of the demolished American consumer culture:

> You have some, Papa.
> I want you to drink it.
> You have some.
> He took the can and sipped it and handed it back. You drink it, he said. Let's just sit here.
> It's because I wont ever get to drink another one, isn't it?
> Ever's a long time.
> Okay, the boy said. (23)

33 The failure to endow the boy with consumer consciousness is peculiar, especially when one considers the product; Coca-Cola has often been regarded as the 'it' product that epitomizes American consumer culture. And so, the boy's rejection can easily be construed as inclusive – it is the rejection of an extinct culture that has no appeal for him.

34 Žižek explores Coca Cola's use-value as he maintains that "Coke functions as a direct embodiment of IT, of the pure surplus of enjoyment over standard satisfaction, of the mysterious and elusive X we are all after in our compulsive consumption of merchandise" ("Surplus" 99). In other words, Coca-Cola's use-value leads us directly to the "desire to desire" (Žižek, *Parallax* 61) by which drinking it never satisfies the consumer but rather triggers the insatiable need to drink more Coca Cola (Žižek, "Surplus" 99), thus turning the individual into a "good" consumer, one who keeps coming back for more. However, the boy's failure to develop an insatiable need for Coca-Cola does not turn him into a

"bad" consumer because he is, in fact, a non-consumer, an individual who cannot be tainted by capitalism since it never existed as far as he is concerned. Therefore, the need for excess cannot be instilled in the boy, regardless of the father's efforts.

35 As Žižek points out, consumer consciousness is intrinsically linked to the imaginary plane of desire for platitude, for surplus:

> At the immediate level of addressing individuals, capitalism, of course, interpellates them as consumers, as subjects of desire, soliciting in them ever new perverse and excessive desires (for which it offers products to satisfy them); furthermore, it obviously also manipulates the 'desire to desire,' celebrating the very desire to desire ever new objects and modes of pleasure. (*Parallax* 61)

36 Such desires stand in stark contradiction to the state of mind of the father, whose means of escapism are no longer cultural or economic but rather corporeal, achieved through the evolving identification with the body of darkness. Yet, the father cannot utterly abandon the consumer consciousness he was raised on. Therefore, the Coca-Cola incident represents a brief moment of surplus, an almost noble attempt, in capitalistic terms, to endow his son with the desire to desire.

37 When asked in an interview about the significance of Coca-Cola in the novel, McCarthy replied: "Well, it just struck me. It's the iconic American product.... The one thing that everybody knows about America, the one thing above cowboys and Indians, above everything else that you can think of, is Coca-Cola. You can't go to a village of 18 people in the remotest part of Africa that they don't know about Coca-Cola" (Jurgensen, "Cola"). McCarthy's choice is double fold; Coca-Cola is not only an inherently American product, its world-wide recognition is emblematic of the status of the U.S. as a modern-day empire and its portrayal in the novel parallels America's demise.

38 In another interview, McCarthy discusses the value of art in the virtual age, in which quantity inevitably influences quality:

> Well, I don't know what of our culture is going to survive, or if we survive. If you look at the Greek plays, they're really good. And there's just a handful of them. Well, how good would they be if there were 2,500 of them? But that's the future looking back at us. Anything you can think of, there's going to be millions of them. Just the sheer number of things will devalue them. (Jurgensen, "Cowboy")

39 McCarthy's pessimistic approach regarding the future of art in the age of abundance can provide an explanation for his post-apocalyptic vision; if endless reproduction constitutes the end of civilized culture, then its absence can provide a new beginning for a culture that shall not be based on capitalistic values.

4. The Living-Dead and the Dead-Living

40 The few survivors that roam around the wasteland in search for food and shelter are often dehumanized and disembodied by the novel's imagery and by the focalization of the father, such are the "Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland" (28), or the "Tattered gods slouching in their rags across the waste" (54). Even the boy is depicted through the father's focalization by using animal analogies: "The boy so frail and thin through his coat, shivering like a dog" (69). Strangers are also analogous to beasts via the father's focalization, as the two come across a man who the father sees as "an animal inside a skull looking out the eyeholes" (65).

41 However, when the third-person narrator depicts the father and the son, the focalization is evidently less disproportionate; the two remain in the human realm, neither glorified as gods nor dehumanized as animals: "They plodded on, thin and filthy as street addicts" (188). This gap allows the father's focalization to stand out as a distinct and personal point of view, one which suggests that the father can no longer perceive human corporeality, whether his or other people's, as a unifying system of meaning.

42 Upon encountering human bodies, the father's focalization seems to conform to that of the omniscient narrator—the remains are clearly depicted as human, despite the fact that they are disfigured. While some bodies perished due to the harsh physical conditions: "A mile on and they began to come upon the dead. Figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling" (203), others were subject to cannibalism: "charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (212). But whether mummified by the cold or eaten by other survivors, the dead seem to be more animated then the living survivors; it is as if in death they have regained some of their lost humanity.

43 It is hardly incidental that the only split in focalization occurs when the father's perspective differs from the perspective of the third-person narrator in relation to corporeality. Indeed, the father's unusual observations of other living humans stems from the disassociation he experiences regarding his own body. Dead bodies no longer embody the duality that the father is struggling with as they are nothing but empty shells, while the human beings he encounters illustrate the very impossibility he attempts to escape by surrendering to the metaphorical body of the darkness.

5. The Naked Narrative

44 McCarthy's style of writing has been shaped by the author's continuous refusal to uphold traditional grammatical rules, most notably in relation to the lack of quotation marks to set apart dialogue from the rest of the narrative. These stylistic choices, evident throughout his body of work, "reflect a postmodern anti-hegemonic sensibility" (Synder and Synder 34). Indeed, McCarthy's fiction is shaped by a particular stylistic aesthetics "a willingness to employ language experimentally, to carry syntax, subordination and word choice in complex and interesting directions" (Frye 153). Yet, *The Road* represents a stylistic departure from McCarthy's earlier novels, "with virtually no archais vocabulary and few syntactic complexities" (Frye 156).

45 The most notable feature of absence in the novel is the fact that the two protagonists are unnamed; reduced to their elementary attributes, they are identified by the reader according to their pronouns and familial titles. The use of pronouns and familial titles instead of first names is certainly significant since it allows McCarthy to "emphasize the characters' deeds by drawing away as little attention as possible from action verbs" (Kunsa 61). Throughout the novel, the man is most often referred to as "he" and his companion, "the boy," often refers to the man as "papa." As a result, the emphasis on action verbs becomes the sole means of characterization in the novel: "the characters are clearly knowable and differentiable from one another by what they *do*. And, in a world where ethical and moral distinctions matter, they can be taken to task for what they do, at least by the reader, if not by some authority within the text" (Kunsa 61).

46 The prose itself is not only sparse and lacking, it "has been returned to its rudiments and now must be re-imagined" (Kunsa 58). Once again, the encounter with the notion of *tabula rasa*, a blank slide, leads us back to the theme of absence. It has also been suggested that McCarthy's minimalistic style is emblematic of the protagonists' journey: "Physically, emotionally as morally, every choice the protagonists of *The Road* face as they trek across the bleak and abstract wasteland of a future America can in some way or other lead back to the ultimate question of *deserta*, of absence" (Graulund 58).

47 The novel certainly promotes the theme of absence on several levels. The most obvious example is on the level of plot, which displays absence through recurring pictorial imagery of a barren ashen land, lacking in both natural and technological recourses. In addition, the narratological level lacks a clear authorial voice as there are generally no clear distinctions between the third person narrator and the focalizations of the father. The stylistic level can also be characterized through the overarching theme of absence; the lack of quotation marks blurs the distinction between the third-person narration and the two protagonists.

48 Moreover, the lack of chapter breaks or titles indicate that the flow of the novel has no clear thematic direction other than the hope for redemption, which is often abstract and absurd in the face of the cruel conditions that father and son must endure. Whether a better place indeed exists is one of the novel's great unanswered questions and constitutes another form of absence. However, it seems that at least for the father, redemption is achieved through physical absence and the separation of the corporeal from the spiritual. This thematic and structural absence certainly facilitates the emergence of the metaphorical body of the darkness. The lack of a clear authorial presence only serves to enhance the metaphorical presence of the darkness and increases the father's level of identification with the darkness and the gradual abandonment of his own corporeality, culminating in his death.

49 In essence, *The Road* begins with the ineffable, the attempt to portray the unrepresenable, that which lies outside of language. In the dream sequence presented at the beginning of the plot, the father can see the internal organs of an ambiguous creature, which emerges from a lake set inside a cave that the father and the son wander into. These layered cavities, which reveal a babushka-like structure, foretell the type of narrative that is about to unfold before the reader: "This translucency signals to the reader that the narrative that is to follow will attempt to probe beyond the knowledge that language can describe to that which humans can experience beyond language" (Woodson 90). However, since the unrepresentable cannot be stretched beyond insinuations, the theme of absence takes its place throughout the novel.

6. The Temporality of the End

50 If one considers the inherently American cultural context in which this novel was written, then it seems that post-9/11 reality has made apocalyptic visions more conceivable. It is not merely the existential anxiety that no one can be trusted, which haunts the father in *The Road* (Jarraway 52), but rather the ominous dread that *anything* can happen, which forms a thematic link between post-9/11 America and McCarthy's Post-apocalyptic America. Moreover, the novel's American context also creates a sense of circular temporality, which juxtaposes the real events of 9/11 alongside McCarthy's

fictional apocalypse. This unique temporality is evident throughout *The Road*, as the novel's depictions suggest that "there is no distinction between night and day. All, it seems, is an eternal middle" (Rambo 101).

51 SöZalan discusses the implicit allusion to 9/11 in *The Road* by making the claim that McCarthy's novel can be seen as a thematic sequel to Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, which is set in post-9/11 New York and details the immediate and long-term aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center: "There is no reference to 9/11 in McCarthy's dystopian tale of pilgrims in an utterly devastated world, yet its wandering characters follow from where DeLillo [in the novel *Falling Man*] leaves his hero practically homeless in a world which has lost its referential value" (xiii). Beyond the sense of existential homelessness, another thematic link can be drawn between *Falling Man* and *The Road* in relation to the metaphorical body—both novels portray male protagonists who survive an apocalypse but lose touch with their masculinity or any other level of identification with their physical body.

52 In a broader sense, DeLillo's post-9/11 New York and McCarthy's post-apocalyptic America echo a similar dissatisfaction with consumer culture and its culpability in the demise of the civilized world. DeLillo poses the Twin Towers as provocation stemming from cultural hubris and McCarthy satirizes the shopping cart and the Coca-Cola enterprise, but both commentaries are secondary in importance to the ontological crisis of the individual, who can no longer distill a sense of meaning and wholeness from his corporeal image.

53 Meaning is certainly pertinent to the conception of time in *The Road* since it usually grants a cultural timeline, a temporal point of reference. In the absence of any referential value, it is clear why the novel conveys the sensation of frozen time, or alternatively, of a temporal dimension caught in an endless loop. These mutually exclusive temporalities coexist in the novel, as it "recasts narrative time, with the setting of the novel at once seemingly ancient and yet also quite contemporary" (Kollin 166). Also, the barren landscape that constitutes the setting of the novel is constantly amassed with cultural allusions of various historical periods: "McCarthy places the American landscape of *The Road* alongside the prehistoric and the pharaonic; his environment is thus Homeric, biblical, as well as contemporary" (Kollin 166).

54 It is also important to note that the novel's temporal dimension clashes with the Christian temporality since it offers no foreseeable sense of either redemption or resurrection: "McCarthy catches the reader in a schizophrenic, and distinctively American, post-apocalyptic crisis of meaning: between the craving for a happy ending (for resolution, for redemption) and the recognition of its impossibility (there is, in Christian terms, no resurrection ahead)" (Rambo 101). Thus, in the absence of a temporal correlation to either the lunar calendar of the natural world and the Jewish calendar or the Christian calendar of crucifixion and resurrection, the novel resorts back to the primordial time of pre-human history. *The Road* depicts "a world that is withdrawing to a pre-language, pre-belief, pre-cultural condition" (Hage 145), a world that has lapsed back to the prehistoric era.

55 The end of the novel links back to this ancient period using the figurative style of fairytales, alluding to the iconic phrase "once upon a time": "Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains" (306). This marker of an unspecified past turning into a mythical and eternal timeline corresponds to Deleuze's "ancient *mythical* present" (88),

the phenomenon of circular time. This mythical present is represented most vividly by the hum that concludes the novel: "In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (307). As a non-verbal sound, it is in fact "a hum beyond language and human understanding" (Hage 145), granting it immortality in the face of human demise. But more importantly, this non-verbal sound is indicative of the supremacy of the soul over the body.

56 This duality, which lingers throughout the novel, is partially resolved by the metaphorical body of the darkness but is also no longer needed at the novel's conclusion. If one considers the father as an allegorical representative of the human race, his death eliminates the innate dichotomy of mind versus matter. In McCarthy's glimpse of the future that is already the ancient past, eternal nature will outlive humanity and the unrepresentable will hum forever.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bakhtin, M. M. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics." *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*. Ed. Brian Richardson. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2002: 15-24. Print.

Bigsby, Christopher. "Introduction." *Death of a Salesman*. Crome Publishing, 2016. Kindle Edition.

Cohen, Maurie J. "Collective Dissonance and the Transition to Post-Consumerism." *Futures* 52 (2013): 42-51. Web.

de Grazia, Victoria. "The Crisis of Hyper-Consumerism: Capitalism's Latest Forward Lurch." *Capitalism: The Reemergence of a Historical Concept*. Ed. Jürgen Kocka and Marcel van der Linden. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016. 71-106. Print.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. London: A&C Black, 2004. Print.

Edwards, Tim. "The End of the Road: Pastoralism and the Post-Apocalyptic Waste Land of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6.1 (2008): 55-61. Print.

Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. South Carolina: South Carolina UP, 2012. Print.

Godfrey, Laura Gurber. " 'The World He'd Lost': Geography and 'Green' Memory in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*". *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 52.2 (2011): 163-175. Print.

Graulund, Rune. "Fulcrums and Borderlands: A Desert Reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Orbis Litterarum 65.1* (2010): 57–78. Print.

Hage, Erik. *Cormac McCarthy: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010. Print.

Humphery, Kim. *Excess: Anti-Consumerism in the West*. Cambridge: Polity, 2010. Print.

Jarraway, David R. "'Becoming Woman': Masculine 'Emergency' After 9/11 in Cormac McCarthy." Canadian Review of American Studies 42.1 (2012): 49-64. Print.

Jurgensen, John. "Cormac McCarthy on How Coca-Cola Ended Up In The Road, and Other Musings." *online.wsj.com*. 12 Nov 2009. Web. 27 Sep 2012.

---. “Hollywood’s Favorite Cowboy.” *online.wsj.com*. 20 Nov 2009. Web. 27 Sep 2012.

Klein, Naomi. *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Vintage Books Canada, 2009. Print.

Kollin, Susan. “ ‘Barren, silent, godless’: Ecodisaster and the Post-abundant Landscape in *The Road* ”. *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*. Ed. Sara Spurgeon. New York: Continuum, 2011. 157-171. Print.

Kunsa, Ashley. “‘Maps of the World in Its Becoming’: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”. *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.1 (2009): 57-74. Print.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. 2006. London: Picador, 2007. Print.

Rambo, L. Shelley. “Beyond Redemption? Reading Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* After the End of the World.” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 41.2 (2008): 99-120. Print.

Schleusener, Simon. “The Dialectics of Mobility: Capitalism and Apocalypse in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.” *European Journal of American Studies* 12.3 (2017): 1-14. Web.

Sözalan, Özden. *The American Nightmare: Don DeLillo’s Falling Man and Cormac McCarthy’s The Road*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2011. Print.

Snyder, Phillip A., and Delys W. Snyder. “Modernism, Postmodernism, and Language: McCarthy’s Style.”
The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy (2013): 27-38.Print.

Warde, Anthony. “‘Justified in the World”: Spatial Values and Sensuous Geographies in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.” *Forum: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts10* (2010):1-13. 6 May 2010. Web. 1 Sep. 2012.

Wilhelm, Randal S. “‘Golden chalice, good to house a god’: Still Life in *The Road*”. *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6.1 (2008): 129-149. Print.

Woodson, Linda. “Mapping *The Road* in Post-Postmodernism.” *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6.1 (2008): 87-99. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. “Surplus-Enjoyment between the Sublime and the Trash.” *Lacanian Ink 15* (1999): 99-107. Print.

---. *The Parallax View*. Cambridge: MIT, 2006. Print.

ABSTRACTS

The essay strives to conceptualize the consumer consciousness of the father and the son in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* by maintaining that post-apocalyptic America has created a new socio-economic status of the non-consumer. The essay also explores the figurative role of the darkness in the novel in relation to the representation of corporeality of the characters and its role in the erosion of the father’s consumer consciousness. In addition, the essay discusses the broad significance of *The Road* as a post-9/11 novel and its thematic connection to Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*.

INDEX

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, The Road, consumer culture, corporeality, Don DeLillo, Falling Man, post-9/11 fiction

AUTHOR

INBAR KAMINSKY

Inbar Kaminsky holds a PhD in English Literature from Tel Aviv University. She has contributed several essays to peer-reviewed journals, including *Philip Roth Studies, North Wind* and*Symbolism*. She has also contributed several chapters about science fiction narratives, film adaptation, post-9/11 fiction and Jewish-American literature to various edited collections.